

Paul and the Athenians

Between three and five hundred years before the time of Christ, the Greeks were laying the foundation of western civilization. In what historians call the “golden age of Greece,” the city-state of Athens gave birth to what we call the arts and the sciences. Plato invented philosophy. Aristotle invented logic and the science of biology. Sophocles invented tragic drama. Aristophanes invented comic drama. Euclid invented geometry. Archimedes discovered some of the first laws of physics. And Pericles, the king, established the world’s first democracy. Another Greek by the name of Alexander the Great conquered the known world and brought Greek culture and the Greek language to the people he conquered. Classical Greek became the common language of the entire world, which is why the New Testament was written in Greek. By Paul’s time—a little over three centuries later—Greece’s military and political power had waned and the world was ruled by Rome, but the Athenians were proud of their heritage and considered themselves superior to the rest of the world. So when Paul, a lowly itinerant Jewish preacher showed up in Athens, he knew he had his work cut out for him in getting the Athenians to listen to his message. His visit is recorded in the 17th chapter of the *Book of Acts*, which is our first lesson for today.

The first thing Paul noticed about Athens was that the city was full of statues of pagan gods and goddesses. The Greeks practiced polytheism which means “many gods” and refers to the practice of worshiping nature gods and trying to elicit favors from them by offering them sacrifices. If there was a drought and you needed rain you offered up a sacrifice to the rain god. If you wanted an abundant crop of wheat you offered up a sacrifice to the god of the harvest. Over the years the Greeks had developed an elaborate polytheistic mythology of gods and goddesses who ruled over virtually all phases of their lives. There was Ares, the god of war, Aphrodite the goddess of love, Poseidon the god of the sea, and Zeus, who ruled over them all. Even though the Greeks were quite advanced intellectually, they still worshipped in a primitive pagan way.

Paul set about his evangelistic work in his typical way: first he went to the Jewish synagogue and preached the Gospel to the Jews and the Greeks who had been converted to the God of Moses. Then he took his message out to the streets, engaging anyone who was willing to talk with him. Soon he was confronted by representatives of the two major schools of philosophy in Athens: Epicureanism and Stoicism. The stoics believed that reason was the highest good. The epicureans believed that pleasure was the highest good. When they heard Paul speaking about Jesus and his resurrection they invited him to accompany them to a meeting place called the Areopagus. The Areopagus was a forum where intellectuals met to discuss the arts and sciences.

It was located on Mars Hill, a short distance from the Parthenon, the Greek architectural marvel that still stands today. The people who met at the Areopagus prided themselves on their open-mindedness and willingness to listen to a wide variety of viewpoints. Luke writes of them that, “all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.” They were like the man of whom it was said the best idea he ever had was the last one he heard. Or the man who they said was so open-minded that his brains were falling out. Up to a point, open-mindedness can be a good thing; but it can also be an enemy of the truth. In any case, Paul was invited to share his ideas with them and so he did. And what he said to them is recorded in *Acts 17*.

For centuries scholars have studied Paul’s speech and have declared to be a masterpiece of rhetoric, or oratory. It contains subtle allusions to famous Greek poets and philosophers from the golden age of Greece, which would have pleased his audience. He starts off by mentioning that as he was examining the statues of gods and goddesses that filled their city he found an empty pedestal with an inscription that read: “to an unknown god.” Apparently the idea was that if you couldn’t find a god or goddess you wanted to worship, you could make up your own god or goddess and worship them. There was a joke circulating around Athens at the time that the gods were becoming so numerous some of them might have to move to the suburbs. Paul, however, uses this image of “an unknown god” to introduce his theme: that he will now reveal this unknown God to them. Now Paul’s speech follows a different pattern than his sermons usually followed. In his sermons, Paul would point to the Old Testament scriptures and their prophecies of the Messiah and then show how Jesus had fulfilled those prophecies and therefore must be the Messiah. But in this speech Paul doesn’t argue from scripture; he argues from reason and logic—hoping to find common ground with his audience. He begins by saying that since there is such a thing as a creation—which no one can deny—there must be a God who created it. Where there is creation there must be a creator. Logical. Then he says that God has made his existence known in his creation so that we mankind could see him, reach out to him and find him. He reasons that a God powerful enough to create the entire universe far exceeds man’s ability to portray him in pictures or statues. Therefore by worshipping statues they are not worshipping God, they are worshipping figments of their own imaginations—in other words imaginary gods. And imaginary gods are idols because anything that man worships other than God is an idol. In the past, Paul says, God has overlooked such idolatry but now he commands all people to repent and worship him alone. Moreover, God has come in the form of a man and has set a date when he will judge those who fail to worship him. Finally, he has given proof that he is that man by rising from the dead. Now Paul was probably doing pretty well with his speech up to the point, but when he mentioned that Jesus had risen from the dead, he broke an ironclad rule of the Areopagus.

All opinions and topics were welcome for discussion except one: that the dead could come back to life. Since everybody knew that that was impossible, the subject was verboten. So Paul's claim of a resurrection would have fallen like a sledge hammer on their ears. It reminds me of a joke about a brilliant man who had degrees in medical science, the law, and pastoral ministry, but who had savagely murdered his wife and had been committed to an asylum for the criminally insane. After several years of imprisonment during which he was a model inmate, he was brought before a board of psychologists who asked him what he would do if he were released into society. Speaking very calmly and thoughtfully he said, "I've given that a great deal of thought. I could take the practice of medicine and help people in that way. Or, I could take up the practice of law and help people who can't afford a lawyer. Or, I could be a pastor and minister to people spiritually. Or, I could become a teapot.

When Paul affirmed that a dead man had come back to life, he might as well as said that the dead man had become a teapot because that was exactly how it hit his audience. It drew sneers and we are told that he attracted very few followers in Athens. Paul's audience at the Areopagus is a classic example of how intellectual pride can hinder people from coming to a knowledge of the truth. Jesus said that God "...hides things from the wise and learned and reveals them to little children. "And still today, so-called wise and learned ignore God's word and follow their own paths of reasoning all the way to the grave. Paul's erudition and range of knowledge were vast: he not only knew the scriptures forwards and backwards, he knew Greek history, poetry and philosophy and could both speak and write Greek perfectly. Yet all his worldly knowledge was useless to him when it came to winning Greek souls for Christ. He tried to use logic and rhetoric rather than God's word to appeal to them—and his speech was a bust. The only truth that saves and sanctifies us is God's word. Paul must have come to that same conclusion. Immediately after this incident, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth He refers to his arrival in Corinth in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*: "when I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." No more rhetoric, no more intellectual showmanship, just the message of the cross presented in weakness, fear and trembling. [Paula Stumph Visit] Paula's message was not the words she spoke; it was her trembling lips and shaking hands that testified to her faith. God has given us minds to use and reason to employ and both of them are great gifts. But the greatest gift of all is God's word of truth through which he saves us and sanctifies us. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word then you are truly my disciples. And you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.

**“Chastened by his experience in Athens, Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God....for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”
Amen.**